DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 325 851 CS 212 561

AUTHOR Cole, SuzAnne C.
TITLE "I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road": Going Public with Creative Responses.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (80th, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) --

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Creative Writing; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; Journal Writing; Reader Response; *Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Writing Development

ABSTRACT

After students' interest in literature has been stirred by journal writing, it is time for them to turn their private journal writing into writing for an audience. Instead of having students write the usual responses to literature, vary their assignments by offering them creative responses, either occasionally or as an individual alternative to more formal essays. Such creative responses include: personal response; imitation; parodies; replies to biased or slanted literature; diaries written from the viewpoint of a literary character; modern recreations of literary settings; newspaper articles or interviews with literary characters; letter writing; character sketch; a "Who's Who" entry; case studies of author or characters; and script or scenario writing. Creative responses can prove mastery of literature provided that the assignments are made as specific as possible and are provided as options for all classroom writing. (RS)

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SuzAnne C. Cole

Presented at NCTE

November 1990

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"I'M GETTING MY ACT TOGETHER AND TAKING IT ON THE ROAD": GOING PUBLIC WITH CREATIVE RESPONSES

After your students' interest in literature has been stirred by journal writing, it's time for them to get their acts together and take them on the road--that is, they must turn their private journal writing into writing for an audience. The challenge is to help them do this without quenching the creative sparks engendered by their journal writing. And here's where clever assignments, but assignments that still prove mastery of the literature studied, come in.

Instead of having students write the usual responses to literature--summaries, paraphrases, analyses, explications, interpretations, and arguments--vary their assignments by offering them creative responses, either occasionally, as exercises for everyone or always as an individual alternative to more formal essays. These papers will be more fun for you to read, and, I'm convinced, prove every bit as successful in engaging students with literature as more traditional assignments.

A personal response to reading a particular work is an easy way to move students from journal writing to public writing. Perhaps they have recorded simple likes and dislikes in their

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journals. Now have them choose an audience to whom their opinion matters--a classmate who hasn't yet read the work, a friend who's considering taking the class next semester, the publisher of the textbook who has asked students to evaluate individual selections in the book.

Ask them to support their personal responses by answering questions such as "Does the work succeed for you? Why? Because of its story, a memorable character, the setting, the mood, or the language?" "Although you like the work, do you still perceive any flaws? If so, where?" "With which character do you feel most empathetic?" "Towards which character do you feel the most antipathy? Why?" "Does the work move you emotionally? Do you care about the ideas, characters, or events? Why?" "If you dislike the work, where does it fail you?"

Another successful creative response is the imitation, a respected and ancient literary form. Because it attempts to recreate the flavor of the original, an imitation adopts as much of the original writer's style and subject matter as possible; therefore, point out to students that it's easiest to imitate writers with unique styles or subjects. Forms for imitation include short stories, poetry, and nonfiction prose written in the style of authors such as Poe, Twain, Pound, Stein, and Chaucer. For example, instead of, or as an option to, explicating a passage from a Jonathan Edwards sermon, why not have students write one--or a portion of one? By the time they've read enough of his sermons to incorporate the structure, style, tone, and diction of that great preacher in an imitation,

they will have learned more about the Great Awakening than they ever could have through a close analysis of a single passage.

Parodies, those imitations that exaggerate the qualities they imitate or inappropriately match style to content, are another ancient literary form. Think of Don Quixote, originally intended as a parody of the chivalric romances then in literary fashion. One of my students once successfully parodied Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" by writing an essay called "A Modern Disposal," a satire on our current methods of dealing with pollution.

Perhaps your students have been stirred up by a work which seems to them excessively biased or slanted. (Perhaps that's even why you chose that particular work.) Give them the opportunity to reply, to present their point of view, to explore the angles that they think the author neglected. I'm currently teaching a course in the Bible as literature, and we recently read the encomium in Proverbs praising the good wife. (You remember, she's the one who gets up while it's still dark to go to the other end of town to market, who spins and weaves and honors her husband and whose children call her blessed?) We had such a fiery discussion--"There are no women like that anymore," "I'm not bragging or anything but I am that woman," "Thank God that's not what I'm bringing my daughter up to be"--that I suggested they stop and do a journal write which, if they wished, they could later turn into one of their class essays.

A more ambitious version of this assignment is to have them reply, not as themselves, but as another author or as a character

from another work. What would Hemingway have to say about Cooper's hero, Leatherstocking? How would Dante have responded to Eliot's The Waste Land? Would Chaucer have read and enjoyed Dickens?

Diaries, written from the viewpoint of an author or a character, can really involve students in literature, forcing them, for example, to consider Ann Bradstreet's thoughts on her voyage to America so they can write her diary entries for the trip. Or they could "discover" Emily Grierson's diary spelling out her relationship with her father or Coleridge's accounts of his opium-induced dreams.

Another literary exercise is a modern recreation. In my Bible as literature course, after we studied the prophet Amos, I asked students to rewrite his tirade against Israel, pretending that he were living in the United States today and making his comments applicable to this country. I believe that writing this sort of essay helps students see the contemporary relevance of the literature they study.

Writing a newspaper article, a fictitious interview, or the script for a television news broadcast can provide students the opportunity to dig deeply in the literature they're studying. Since the factual detail of their reports should be accurate according to the literary work, you may find students stick more closely to the details if you have them create questions to be answered by quotations or paraphrases.

Two students in my Bible literature class wrote up interviews with Job; both captured perfectly the contrast in tone

between the earnest Job trying to share his hard-won insight and the interviewers' attitude: ". . . and now I understand you have twice as much property as you had before? How does that make you feel?" Students may be helped with this assignment if you are quite specific--mention the interviewer, TV show, or newspaper by name. Can you see Barbara Walters tracking Thoreau into the woods and asking him what kind of tree he would be? I also can hardly wait for one of my students to write the story of Jonah, National Enquirer style, an option on their next assignment.

Another print media activity is to have students write an editorial about an issue or theme from a work--the pitiful plight of dowerless daughters, the situation of women authors who have no rooms of their own, living conditions for migrant workers, the frenzied activities of today's urban professionals. Students--like most of us--enjoy sharing their opinions and the editorial provides a perfect forum for writing opinion.

How about the letter format for an informal writing assignment? Instead of having students write a plot summary or a review for you the instructor, let them try writing a letter to a friend about the great novel they just finished. Perhaps they'd like to try to explain something that is omitted from the work--how about trying a letter to her parents from "My Last Duchess"?

Or, more ambitiously, instead of a character sketch, let them write a letter about an imaginary meeting they've had with someone from one of the works they're studying--Richard Cory, Captain Ahab, Hester Prynne, the Wife of Bath, the Ancient Mariner. They could also write a letter to a character in a

work. Or they could write a letter from one character in a work to another, perhaps filling the reader in on what happens in the world of the work afterwards.

Another replacement for the character sketch is to have students write a Who's Who entry or brief biography for a character. Ask them to imitate the official formal style of such books.

If you're all--teachers and students--in a gloomy mood, have them kill off a character or an author and write a eulogy or obituary. Read the local paper, The New York Times, or The Times of London for models.

Students who've had a course or two in psychology may be interested in writing a case study of an author or character, based on observation or actual therapy sessions. Such an assignment provides them the perfect chance to analyze the author they've been calling "crazy," "sick," or "weirdo" in class discussion anyway. (And it may be that after researching the author's background necessary for such an assignment, they may have more sympathy for the author. We can hope.) If you or they are really up to a challenge, have them assume the persona of Freud or Jung to conduct their analysis.

Our coming-of-age-under-the-influence-of-video generation of students may appreciate the challenge of writing a script or scenario based on a literary work, including, of course, music, graphics, choreography, lighting, and setting.

Instructors and students with a flair for the theatrical will enjoy working on dramatic monologues or soliloquies in which

a character pleads with an audience to understand his or her motives or an author asks for more empathy than he or she gets from the critics. Provide a stage for David Copperfield's child-wife Dora or Wordsworth's sister Dorothy.

Or invent dialogues between characters in the same work, in different works, and between authors. If Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson met at a writers' workshop, what would they say to each other? What would they like about each other's works? Find difficult to understand? How about Kate Chopin and Toni Morrison? Oscar Wilde and Arthur Miller?

To sum up, turning creative journal entries into clever written assignments brings pleasure to both you and your students because, as Kant says, "Happiness is not an ideal of reason but of imagination." As an instructor who has tried creative assignments for years, I am perfectly satisfied that they do prove mastery of literature, provided that we teachers be as specific as possible in making these assignments, that we provide them as options for all classroom writing, and that we let our imaginations soar in the classroom. As Wordsworth puts it so eloquently in The Prelude:

> Imagination, which, in truth,
> Is but another name for absolute power
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And Reason in her most exalted mood. (14:190)